

US seniors group attacks pharmaceutical industry "fronts"

Ray Moynihan *Washington*

The giant US seniors group AARP, which has 35 million members aged over 50, has accused the pharmaceutical industry of funding "front" groups that purport to represent older Americans but instead push industry friendly political messages.

An investigation by the *AARP Bulletin* has discovered that three key organisations, the United Seniors Association, the Seniors Coalition, and the 60 Plus Association, have all received substantial contributions in recent years from the drug industry.

"When the pharmaceutical industry speaks these days, many Americans may not be able to recognize its voice. That's because the industry often uses 'front groups' that work to advance its agenda under the

veil of other interests," says the article.

AARP is one of the strongest citizens groups in the United States, and it is currently lobbying hard for a national pharmaceutical scheme to help older people to meet their drug costs. Proposals for a new scheme have split the US congress, with Democrats favouring a government-run approach, and the Republicans supporting a more privatised market based plan, also being promoted by the pharmaceutical industry.

The AARP article gave detailed figures of drug company funding for the three seniors groups, and cited examples of pro-industry campaigning, including multimillion dollar television advertisements in the closing weeks of the congressional elections in November

2002. The 60 Plus Association is accused of being involved with "astro-turfing"—allegedly helping to create a false grass roots campaign to defeat proposed state laws on prescription drugs.

The AARP's policy director, John Rother, said his organisation was now considering calling for new laws mandating disclosure of sponsors' names in any political advertising. He told the *BMJ* that apart from Pfizer, which mounted a campaign in its own name before the 2002 elections, "the rest of the industry hid behind this device of using phoney seniors' organisations."

A spokesperson for Pfizer said that its campaign was designed to improve understanding of the industry's involvement in research and generate support for a prescription drug scheme.

Jeff Trewhitt, spokesman for the Washington based lobby group, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, refused to respond to the specific allegations that industry was hiding behind front groups, saying that industry did not discuss its tactics: "I don't see a problem here."

The 60 Plus Association's president, Jim Martin, rejected the accusations about front groups, telling the *BMJ* that his 10 year old group started taking money from drug companies only two years ago. He said his association had 225 000 donors but that to protect privacy it had a policy of not revealing names. □

The article, "Front Groups: Drug industry Pulls Strings From Afar," is available at www.aarp.org/bulletin/

United Kingdom finally bans tobacco advertising

Lynn Eaton *London*

Tobacco advertising was due, finally, to be outlawed in the United Kingdom on 14 February, although there will still be tobacco sponsorship of sports for another two years and some advertising will be possible at the point of sale of cigarettes.

The change in the law marks the end of a long, hard battle by campaigners, including the BMA and Action for Smoking on Health (ASH). It had been progressing through parliament under the 1997-2001 Labour government. But after the 2001 election, when Labour was re-elected, it was mysteriously dropped from the legislative timetable, despite being in the party manifesto.

Amanda Sandford, research

manager with ASH, said it was "great" that the law was at last being enacted: "It is important because we know that advertising works. It encourages people to continue to smoke."

She said tobacco companies were known to launch campaigns or to offer money-off tokens around the times that people might consider giving up, such as New Year and No Smoking day.

Advertising at the point of sale was something Ms Sandford described as "totally wrong." "But that is a weakness of the law," she said.

The BMA's head of science and ethics, Dr Vivienne Nathanson, said the new law was "fantastic news." She said:



"Doctors see first hand the devastating effects of tobacco every day of their working lives. The statistics speak for themselves—120 000 people die each year from smoking. Half of all the people who smoke will die from tobacco related causes."

Even in the final days before the ban was introduced,

the tobacco industry gasped its last breath by slipping in a series of advertisements that cleverly alluded to the imminent ban. Gallaher, the manufacturer of Silk Cut, for example, ran a series of billboard advertisements on the theme: "It's not over until the fat lady sings." □